

# **Will MidAmerican build a nuke plant in Payette County?**

**A subsidiary of PacifiCorp's owner hasn't bought the land but is conducting tests to make sure it's stable.**

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A newly formed nuclear energy company controlled by billionaire Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway is considering building a nuclear power plant in northern Payette County.

MidAmerican Nuclear Energy Co., a subsidiary of the Des Moines, Iowa-based MidAmerican Energy Holdings Co., has been doing geologic testing on about 3,300 acres of private land south of Paddock Valley Reservoir.

This is the second proposal for a nuclear power plant in Idaho in less than a year. The first has been proposed on farmland in Owyhee County near Bruneau by a small startup company founded by a former nuclear industry executive.

MidAmerican owns and operates major utilities, including PacifiCorp, Oregon's largest utility, and Rocky Mountain Power, which serves eastern Idaho.

"We're in a very preliminary due diligence process to look at a potential energy project in Payette County," Bill Fehrman, president and chief nuclear officer for MidAmerican Nuclear Energy Co., told the Idaho Statesman on Monday.

MidAmerican joins more than a dozen companies hoping to take advantage of a resurgence in the nuclear power industry. With memories of the Three Mile Island disaster fading, U.S. business and political leaders see nuclear power as a key to meeting energy needs without contributing to greenhouse gases that cause global warming.

The company hasn't yet purchased the land. Fehrman said the landowner does not want to be identified. Fehrman declined to release the exact location. Residents have reported seeing company trucks along Little Willow Road.

Fehrman said the land is being tested for seismic activity to make sure it's stable. The company also has to make sure there is ample water for the project and adequate transmission lines to carry the power.

A decision to buy the land and go forward with the plant probably won't be made until mid to late 2008, he said. If the company decides to build a plant, Fehrman said it could be 10 to 12 years before the plant would operate.

"This is a lengthy and detailed process and we understand that there might be questions from people who live in the area, and we will do the best we can within the process to keep Payette County residents informed," he said. "As soon as a formal announcement is made on what direction we are taking, we will be communicating and having meetings with residents."

The size of the plant hasn't been determined, but Fehrman said most new plants being planned are in the range of 1,100 to 1,600 megawatts. A plant at the upper range could potentially provide more power than all three of Idaho Power's Hells Canyon hydropower dams.

Fehrman said MidAmerican had looked at other sites in the region, but the Payette site appealed to the company because MidAmerican would be able to provide power for its subsidiaries, including PacifiCorp and Rocky Mountain Power, as well as other Idaho utilities like Idaho Power.

He said Payette was also attractive because of its quality of life and its ability to provide a work force. Fehrman said the company also considered Gov. Butch Otter's support of nuclear power.

Ron Wrest, economic development coordinator for Payette County, said the plant would be a big boost to the county's economy.

"We have had a lot of tire kickers talk about big projects, but they don't pan out," said Wrest, who was unaware of MidAmerican's interest until contacted by a reporter Monday. "If they're interested in us, we're interested in them."

Don Gillispie, CEO and president of Alternate Energy Holdings, said he doesn't expect a MidAmerican plant to hurt the 1,600-megawatt plant he's proposing in Owyhee County.

The Payette County plant would be MidAmerican's first nuclear plant. The company has experience building fossil fuel plants and renewable-energy projects like wind power.

Ken Miller, an energy specialist with the Snake River Alliance, says it makes sense for MidAmerican and other power companies to seek out nuclear power. "They need to reduce their carbon footprint, and nuclear has no emissions," Miller said.

But Miller, whose organization calls itself Idaho's nuclear watchdog, said nuclear power still generates radioactive waste that must be disposed of and strains water supplies.

"We take a position that we should be developing renewable energies and getting serious about energy conservation before going down that road," Miller said.

Miller's organization opposes the plant in Owyhee County but hasn't developed a position yet on MidAmerican's interest.

Paul Kjellander, administrator of Otter's Office of Energy Resources, said the state is aware of the project.

"I'm glad to see there is an interest in Idaho," Kjellander said. "If you look at our energy future, nuclear has the potential to play a significant role. The governor supports the concept of nuclear energy, and that may make Idaho a little more attractive."

Kjellander cautioned that nuclear power isn't a full answer to the state's energy needs.

"We can't ignore energy efficiency, demand-side management or renewable resources," he said. "These have to all remain on the table. The reality is that nuclear power is 10 to 15 years away from a reality, and we still have a lot of work ahead of us."

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